

How to choose a CRO

There are number of issues and aspects to consider when choosing the partner for your studies, their individual importance varying depending on the type of the study and the collaboration. In a long run, the best results are surely obtained from a collaboration that is a win-win situation for the both parties, and is built on a mutual respect, trust, flexibility and transparency from the both sides. Here are some recommendations:

- ✚ **Ease of communication:** Go for a company with which you feel easy to communicate with. It is important that you can easily contact your partner, and get a meaningful response when most needed. This means, that you ask anything, any time, and they are ready to help you.

Some companies prefer e-mails in communication over telephone, which is nice because that way everything remains in records without extra notes and in scientific issues the answering is often easier when there is a minute to gather your thoughts. But you should also always feel comfortable to call your CRO, feeling rather welcomed than like disturbing their precious time. The ease of communication also comes from clarity and professionalism; the best partner is transparent and does not try (or fail) to hide their message beyond unnecessary marketing talk or non-relevant details.

- ✚ **Scientific competence:** One of the most important things when you choose a CRO. Contract laboratory's services have to be based on solid high-level scientific competence, so that you can feel secured on every detail they hand to you. Scientific competence must be in the study planning and protocols, in the practices applied in laboratory, in the level of data interpretation and in the results and reporting, not forgetting conclusions.

CRO have to be able to recommend you a certain study after hearing your specific needs, and equally importantly, scientifically argue why you need that particular study and not something else. Ask them all issues relevant the study, so you will get an impression about their expertise. Take a look to their web-site or marketing material, that material is surely used to tell you about their extraordinary expertise and publications. Remember however to confirm if the staff behind the published papers is still in the company or has the promoted expertise already walked out; there is at least one example of European "consolidated CRO" that is advertising with a long list of papers written by their ex-personnel (and even with papers that has nothing to do with the company).

- ✚ **Flexibility:** There some questions that you have to think about. Can they adopt your own study set up and report template? Can they change the experimental parameters, such as number or length of time points, concentration levels, cofactors or analytical approach? It is important that the CRO can tailor and modify the experiments for each specific need and situation. This is a sign of excellence and higher understanding of the test system. The concept of flexibility comes up also in a number of other issues, such as pricing/invoicing system and times. By choosing partner able to react rapidly to changes in experimental environment and your needs, you will save your time and money. In the end, and more than anything, flexibility is a general way of doing and matter of culture in the company, and something you absolutely want to have from your partner.
- ✚ **Breadth of service portfolio and special expertise:** When you are outsourcing more than one type of studies, it is naturally a positive sign if you can get as many of those, at least the most closely related studies, from a one and the same partner. This usually saves time and money, as more experiments can be conducted from the same samples or same amount of compound, with lots of benefits in time consumption. The laboratory that has studied your compound once has experience if there are certain precautions or problems in its handling, and they probably have ready analytical methods for the next studies – raising the quality and fastening the turnaround times. Even if you have only one study type to outsource at the moment, take a look to CRO's portfolio, to see if they can offer you also other related services, because most probably in the future, if your project is going further in the pipeline, you will need them. It is however worth remembering that different companies have different principles in their service offering; others may have really strong focus and high expertise to certain and others may prefer to work with slower but more optimized methods. Therefore it may be worth to spend a moment by thinking if you need the highest quality, broadest portfolio, or fastest turnaround time – all this rarely comes in the same package.
- ✚ **Pricing system:** See if the pricing system is clear, so that you can easily see the price for the studies, when and how to pay. If conducting certain studies for a regular basis, ask for a tailored long-term pricing system (quote) for the studies you are outsourcing. Regarding invoicing, also ask for a way suitable for your company; smaller studies may be easier to pay/charge in one invoice only, whereas larger studies are usually paid in several steps (e.g. after signing contract/after preliminary results/after final report). And it should go without sayings that compare the prices between CROs not only as numbers on the invoice, but with respect to the quality of the service.

- ✚ **Quality system:** In discovery phase and early phase of development, quality system status is not needed from regulatory point of view, but in some studies during the later development and clinical studies the GLP status is required by the authorities. Even if you work in a QC label free environment and do not need a label from quality system to your studies from official reasons, it is worth checking how your partner has taken care of the issue. The certified quality system is a sign that the company wants to show you they have paid attention to quality issues and work according to good practices, even not having a GLP but some other certificate. However, this does not necessarily need to be certified, but meaning that they have standard operation procedures (SOPs) defining the basis and guidelines for all routine work, controlling the storage and handling of samples and compounds, adequate and safe & confidential data storage, and guaranteeing traceability of all experiments and other actions related to outsourced work.
- ✚ **Personnel qualification:** Who are the persons you trust your samples, studies and perhaps the whole fate of the development project? To start with, the first thing is that the people with right education, training and experience are in the right places. Regarding directing staff, the appropriate academic rank, background from a acknowledged party or proven scientific resume are positive signs, and if you want to be comprehensive, you may ask how the work is divided between the operational staff; are chemists, biochemists, or other scientists in a lab together with technicians and assistants, and who takes care of what in each phase of the study.
- ✚ **Instrumentation:** As well as it is important that the staff is well trained, it is worth checking that they have right tools for the job. This may be an overkill with respect to basic laboratory devices and tools, but with respect to high price equipment and gadgets, such as analytical instruments or robotics, it may be worth checking that the partner have the right and adequate instruments to produce high quality data.
- ✚ **Audit the laboratory:** Even though discussions over phone and e-mails are convenient way to get an impression about your CRO, there is no other as good way to get the final opinion about the laboratory, facilities and staff than to see yourself. You will get a much better and more personal relationship with the people and you will see the places, instruments and how things are done. The first step in meeting the CRO people, even from many companies at the same time, may be also easily established in exhibitions and conferences.

- ✚ **Location:** With respect to deeper personal relationship, and possibility to face-to-face meeting, the nearer the better. With respect to shipment issues and turnaround times - no matter at all. Logistics for all study related material works how it should work in the third millennium; you rarely see the difference if you send your material or samples 100 or 3000 miles. All taken care within the time range during which dry ice keeps your samples just perfect.
- ✚ **Ask your peers & colleagues:** Perhaps one of the best ways to find a good contract laboratory is to ask your colleagues from the same field, which company they were satisfied with, who they would recommend.